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ABSTRACT

This monograph posits a rhetorical theory of video-art and presents perspectives on the status of video-art in Latin America. Video-art, which utilizes technology in the field of aesthetics, is perceived as fundamentally rhetorical and stylistic. Conclusions about the form include the comments that the analysis of visual messages is possible through the use of the theory of semiotics, that the dominating form of visual communication today is television, that electronic technology has been used by vanguard artists to create video-art, that Latin American video-art may be analyzed by employing rhetorical theory, that the sociohistorical conditions which generate Latin American video works are transformed by the video expressions themselves, and that traditional rhetoric does not explain all of the mechanisms present in a video work. References are made to the works of several Latin American video-artists, and a schematization of the rhetorical model of video-art is provided. (KS)

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of Communications
1977 Annual Conference

Working Group: Art and Technology
New Forms of Creativity

Rhetoric of Art and Technology in Latin America

by Jorge Glusberg

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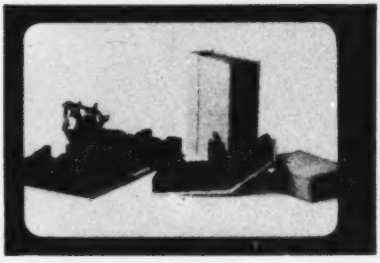
Traditional rhetoric, such as reaches us through different types of compilations and manuals —of which the most important, undoubtedly, is the **Traité de l'Argumentation,** by Perelman and Olbretch-Tyteka— consists, in the majority of cases, of inventories of the figures or tropes which the history of literature and persuasive speeches have accumulated, and which are presented to us as listings. Only in our days, after 2,000 years of oratory, has the task begun of systematizing rhetorical knowledge, and, simultaneously, of applying it to fields different from the traditional ones. In particular, the application of known figures such as metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche —among the most important ones— to the field of psychoanalysis or the investigation of images, has shown itself as having a great richness and has turned out to be of an astonishing fertility for the understanding of significant phenomena. In the field of semiotics, which was originally developed on the basis of logic and linguistics —with Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure— and the research into which has today branched out into fields which were not foreseen by its founders, such as zoosemiotics and phytosemiotics, rhetoric is a greatly valued auxiliary.

With the asistance of the well-known figures, Roland Barthes was the first to propose, in 1961, a "Rhetoric of the Image", and this road has been followed by numerous thinkers who applied tropes to increase the depth of the phenomena of visual communication.

This theoretical interest coincides with the accelerated and progressive development of technology as applied to the mass communication media, in particular the cathode-ray tube for the development of television channels. On the basis of the portable TV camera a new and revolutionary form of art has been developed in recent years: video-art. It is revolutionary, because it arose to contest its own root, commercial television, attempting to alter the habitual models of perception of the image on the part of the receivers; and additionally because of the character of its irruption within the visual arts, in particular in the face of those which continue to repeat themselves on the basis of traditional canons and rules, such as easel painting. This view allows the use of a perfected and distinct theoretical equipment for the analysis of images within the scope of a practice such as that of video-art.

Although the usual rhetorical figures for the consideration of the image do not manage to cover the specifics of the visual message, as their origin in linguistic, they have

Jacques Bedel



permitted development which, as in the case of those of Peninou or Umberto Eco, allow a deeper understanding of the formal and ideological mechanisms engaged by the advertising or cinematographical image.

When we attempt to apply these schemes to the universe of discourses of video-art, the view rarifies. In the first place, the technical and electronic resources of video through the development of image synthesizers and diverse kinds of equipment, allow the obtention of visual effects which are hard to assimilate with the known tropes. In the second place, the rhetorical maneuvers which are present in video's artistic discourses are not comprehensible beyond a concrete insertion in determined circumstances of social life, that is, if marginated from the real creative conditions in which the video work is generated. Each work exhibits a specific form as a fúnction of the historial characteristics and cultural determinations of the geopolitical ambience in which it is produced. The artistic product cannot in any case be dissociated from the structural conditions in which it originates. These conditions are present in the work, but transformed; and this manner of manifesting the conditions of the artistic discourse in particular of video-art, is fundamentally rhetorical and stylistic.

We might summarize these conclusions, which employ video-art as the paradigm of the utilization of technology in the field of esthetics, in the following manner:

(a) The analysis of visual messages is possible on the basis of the utilization of elements of the theory of semiotics, in particular of rhetoric.

(b) The dominating form of visual communication today is television.

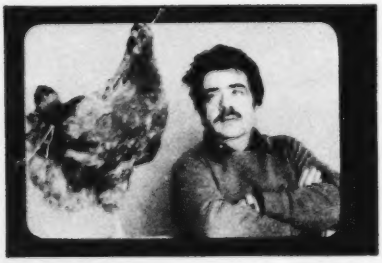
(c) Vanguard art has taken electronic technology as the basis for one of the most important creative manifestations: video-art.

(d) Latin American video-art may be analyzed on the basis of the conceptual artillery contributed by the sciences of communication including rhetoric.

(e) The own characteristics of the socio-historical conditions in which Latin American video works are generated remain marked —present but transformed— in the very style of the artistic products. In consequence, a stylistic analysis ought to allow a thorough-going look into the structural condition of their production.

(f) Given the complexity derived from the utilization of electronic techniques for the processing of video images —synthesizers, computers, etc.— the figures described by traditional rhetoric do not manage to cover the entire

Luis Benedit



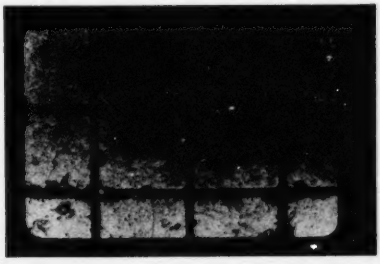
set of signifying mechanisms which are present in a video work.

Rhetorical model of video-art

We shall now turn to the exploration of these conclusions, attempting to put together a rhetorical model of video-art.
We thus distinguish three orders for the understanding of the rhetorical process of this artistic form:
1. The **communicational order,** which includes the levels of the circuit up to the interpretation of the video work by the receiver.
2. The **productional order,** which spans the factors and their transformations to reach production and creation.
3. The **conditional order,** which includes the general possibilities of the other orders, called "states".
All the elements of order 1 take their place along the axis of production of video-art as a genetic and even psychological fact (for instance, its 'conception" on the part of the artist). Each one of them has multiple relationships with its corresponding elements of order 2: certain technical means being in existence, the conditions of possibility of creation are given The conception of the work is the most important factor for the artistic operator, insofar as this conception is linked, from its beginnings, to a concrete form of realization. The latter, in turn, cannot be effected with-out being considered within a particular "style". Which means that the artist, upon conceiving the "what", simultaneously conceives the "how", according to our conviction that there are no isolated stylistic strategies of a concrete subject to be treated rhetorically.
On the basis of the raw material offered by technological development, the operator (second order) processes it. This mechanism is a rhetorical transformation, the formal search for a meaning. In other words: the operator gives a "form" to a "substance" (to use Hjelmslev's concepts) and to give shape to a substance is to transform it rhetorically. Let us remmeber Hjelmslev's model:

Expression	Content
Substance	Substance
Form	Form

Jorge Glusberg



We thus have a form of expression, a substance of expression, a form of content and a substance of content. In the case which we are examining the subtance of expression is visual, derived from a complex electronic process. The form of expression is the manner in which the operator organizes the raw material, in which he selects and combines the image sequences. The substance of content is what we call "the subject of the work". As for the form of the content, it is the relationship between a concrete videotape and others. The conditions of creation (third order) are the bases of the production of the different "states" of the process; thus, technological progress allows the utilization of electronic equipment (order 2); in the communicational levels (order 1), the work appears as a mere possibility, because of the fact that there exist certain technical means, in the same way as the phonatory organs constitute a possibility for speech, although this possibility is not made use of, that is, even though speech is not uttered.

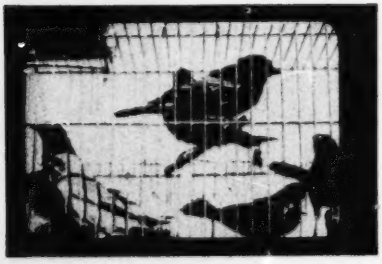
Socio-cultural conditions act fundamentally on two points: determining the artistic operator, on one hand, and the receiver of the work, on the other. The operator, as a factor of the process of creation, acts in a certain historical and cultural framework, and this placement is the one which incides principally in his "conception" of the work: the operator expresses himself.

But "video-expression" (let us set aside, for the moment, the question whether art is expression or communication) demands certain mechanisms. These semiological mechanisms are particularly evident in non-figurative art, in which the language is out in the open and does not hide behind a supposed "copy of reality".

The different forms of expression constitute different rhetorical models, different styles. These styles, in turn, are neither universal nor individual: they depend on social groups to which the operator belongs and, fundamentally, are understood on the basis of their relation to other styles, to other rhetorical maneuvers which are present both in the history of videotapes as well as that of the medium which most resembles them: the cinema.

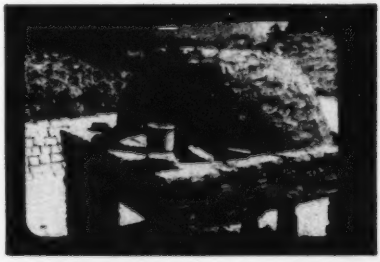
We wish to say that is not possible to carry out the individual analysis of a video work in its rhetorical aspect except in a comparative form, with the differential field in which it is included. In this way, the investigation of the rhetoric or the style of the work implies a structural conception, in the same way that what defines a

Jorge González Mir



phoneme in linguistics is not comprehensible except with respect to the other phonemes, or a psychical representation cannot be investigated except in relation to the rest of the body ob subjective representations.
The fundamental determination in the rhetoric of videotapes is the technical process of the creation of images, forms, colours, movements. Since video-art is characterized by the fact that it systematically exploits these resources offered by technical and scientific progress, its rhetoric, or at least the basic aspect of its rhetoric, has to do with the reference of the video work to its technical production conditions. Thus we are faced with the need to analyze a rhetorical interplay within the Message-Code relation, that is, a discourse which sends one back to its own matrix
Stylistic maneuvers, for this reason, acquire an exceptional richness on video-art; we call them "rhetorical transformations" and place this factor at the centre of the process, for various reasons:
a) Owing to the vary wide margin of freedom in the possible combinations, to the intervention of so many variables such as movement, form, colour, grain, speed, etc., the rhetorical process on video-art exceeds, more than in any other artistic medium, the frame of the traditional "figures" or the conventional discoursive forms.
b) Metaphors, metonymy, synecdoche and other figures described since antiquity and applied to the investigation of images present themselves in video work in a form which is hard to discriminate, and demand a more global perspective, which includes "specific figures of video-art".
The reference of video-art to its technical possibilities, or what, inspired by Jakobson, we call "reference of the message to its code or to another message", implies a basic rhetoric which is comprehensible on the basis of what in linguistics is called "cited discourse": a sequence send one back to the code, to another sequence, or to itself at various times.
The transformations may be multiple, as in the case of fadeouts, slow motion, colour changes, etc., which allows the detection of specific tropes. Let us remember that linguistical rhetorical figures do not take the spatial or the temporal dimension into consideration.
Independently of the above, stylistic processes in video-art allow scholastic polemics referred to the nature of the figures to be surmounted. Let us remember that for many rhetoricians, a figure is a transformation of a

Victor Grippo



discourse which could have been produced in a more simple, more common form.

Faced with this perspective there arose thinkers who stated that there do not exist in language the supposed "more simple" expressions on the basis of which one may arrive at their rhetorical form. Quoting Nietzsche, some of them even assert that "the metaphor is the real essence of language" and that a langu-ge without figures is inconceivable.

This problem dissappears in the case of video-art: what would it mean to say that a human body outline fused with a violin in a composition is a transformation of something which could be expressed in a more "simple" way? This has no meaning in the field of video-art.

From the linguistic point of view, both postures are extreme. The latter ignores, for instance, the fact that scientific discourse struggles permanently against ambiguity and that this latter is a constitutive part of figurative language. There are no "figures" in logics or mathematics. Besides, it is true that to say "frozen music" (Goethe) is a complication of the word "architecture".

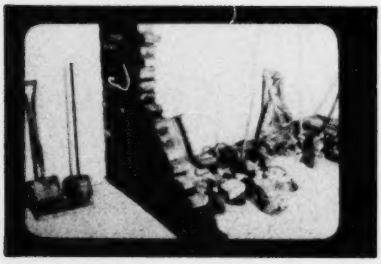
But in video-art there does not exist any "simple" or "normal" basic language. Everything is rhetorical, not as a transformation of supposedly more direct phrases, but as what is specific of the semiotical process.

In art there are no transformations of language "a" into language "b"; language "b" **is** language "a".

Rhetoric in video-art does not, consequently, mean the same as rhetoric in language. There is no possibility of speaking of "rhetoric" in general and saying, for example, that the different semiotic objects present different stylistic characters, because this would imply the existence of universal rhetorical laws, particularized in each case.

In our terrain it is valid to say that the rhetoric of video-art is what constitutes their language. For this reason, video works demand a specific investigation of their expressive forms, of their signs, autonomously of the mechanical application of the linguistic figures for their stylistic categorization.

Víctor Grippo

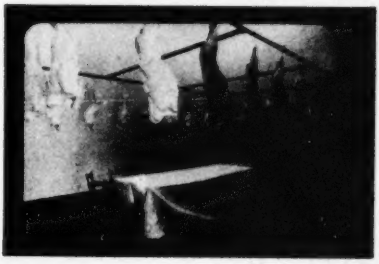


Communication and Meaning

We have said that the dominant form of visual communication, today, is television. If we remember that already since the beginnning of the century, artists have been drawn towards technologies which trascend the

plane of the painted canvas for the sculptural volume, a clearer understanding may perhaps be obtained of the contribution of television by renewing both the materials of esthetic statement and the very concept of art.
This is because the revolution carried out by technology could not fail to have a direct and profound influence on an activity, such as that of art, which is always sensitive to the changes undergone by the conditions in which it is carried out. Today, even though the greater part of the esthetic output connected with the most recent technical developments does not copy anything —that is, it does not constitute an iconic reflection of external reality— it does not cease to refer insistently to the materials which serve as their basis.
Electronic technology has thus ended up, in the hands of artists, as a means of expression. The cathode-ray tube has staked out with fire the paths of today's art, fusing it with its own characteristics in two senses: the possibility of a wider dissemination and the incorporation of new creative nuances determined by the own modalities of the channel or its technical resources.
Regarding the former, television, on a scale far above that of any other communication medium, constitutes an enormously important **virtual** transmitter of esthetic contents. This virtualness is related to the multitude of commercial interests which prevent a wider spread of true creative experiences. For the moment, the latter are limited to a few special circuits, to being used in a scarce number of circumstance and for limited consumption.
As for the specific aspect of "content" offered by TV as a medium for the development of esthetic manifestations, the large number of resources offered by the development of electronics as from the creation of synthesizers and diverse types of mechanisms for the control and transformation of the image, allows an almost unforeseeable range of effects.
Therefore, video-art constitutes, undoubtedly, the most interesting synthesis of art and technology. On observing the phenomenon closely, it is perceived that we are not faced with a case of adopting a technique for an already existing content: the content derives from the signifiant characteristics of the medium employed, and this fact entails the peculiarity and idiosyncrasy of video-art.
Contrary to the case of the cinema screen, which presents itself to the viewer in centrifugal form (events "include" the spectator, who goes towards it), video is eminently centripetal: the centre of gravity is in the screen, and it is there that the points of tension

Leopoldo Maler



converge. From the psychological angle and regarding the concentration of attention, video thus presents the highest number of conditions which are appropiate for the transmission of esthetic contents.

Naturally, the correlation between the psychophysiological conditions of video perception and its technical conditions is immediate. Nevertheless, the most outstanding fact about the use of cathode rays resides in the permanent transformation of its own technical characteristics into its subject. The video message is self-reflexive: its referent is formed by the spectrum of its own technical possibilities. In this way, denotation and connotation coincide in this singular expressive medium.

If we understand by connotation the mode in which certain operations are carried out, insofar as they are not the only possible ones and have been the object of an option on the part of the artistic operator, video offers an in-exhaustible range of options in different registers.

But is it possible to dissociate the potentiality for expansion of video-art as a collective communicational factor, from its technical peculiarities? We believe it is not, despite our not sharing the well-mooted aphorism according to which "the medium is the message" (unlike Mc Luhan, we believe that the message refers, alludes to the medium, without identifying with it).

Unfortunately, the ritualizations imposed on the audience by the commercial television circuits hinder the free development of this artistic manifestation. This is not an evil derived from "inhuman and enslaving" technology, as it is presented by those who wish to preserve art from any contamination, in an absurd and retrograde purism. Far from being linked to technological development, the ills which affect the creative deployment of the new media and materials have to do with social conflicts and not with the unceasing progress of technology and its applications.

Nevertheless, video-art has, in the last few years, been achieving such a spread and importance that many critics and students of the phenomenon perceive this form as the leap towards a new esthetic culture. In the hands of artists, video modifies the basic attitudes, the structure of intention, and the ecology of communications processes.

This growth achieved by video is the result of personal interactions with the form, on the part of an ever-growing number of artists who, although setting themselves dissimilar and unequal efforts and objectives, attempt to

Vicente Marotta

liberate an energy which is imprisoned and suffocated by its traditional commercial use.
The purpose of the first works of video-art, particularly those of Nam June Paik, wasn't to draw the attention of the recipient to the images in themselves —like the twisted portraits of Nixon and the Beatles — but to shake the public's preconceived notions as to the perception of images. The synthesizer arose from the experiments on the distortion of the image; built with the cooperation of the Japanese engineer Shuya Abe, it allows the operator to create the socalled "pure" electronic fantasy, as a result of retroaction oscillations and distortions of the synthesized photographic image.
Making use of this instrument and other similar ones, an ever more numerous group of artists works on perfecting the necessary techniques and tools for the production of an electronic art. According to Paik's conceptual redefinition, painting should be carried out with a cathode ray canvas and an electronic brush. This way of conceiving artistic practice is correlative to a new way of grasping the nature of the Artist-Work-Public circuit, on the part of those who have integrated electronics into their creative output.
Indeed, video-art necessarily implies the transformation of the roles of the public, from that of passive recipient to another in which interaction is essential for the work to be completed. With video, the environmental nature of the medium stimulates this interchange: video includes the public as information. However, the real art of video is basically different from the art produced by a machine; rather than to the artist's hand, it resembles a cybernetic extension of his mind.
It so happens that video is an eminently social and communicative activity and, at the same time, a significant phenomenon of enormous importance. Consequently, both from a semiology of communication and from a semiology of signification, it is possible to face the act of video as the simultaneous vessel of the factors which make of it a communicational phenomenon — that is to say, recognized as such by its protagonists — and a phenomenon of signification.
In many cases, despite the openly communicational structure which it presents, video offers no more than a significant perspective. This demands that we clarify the difference between a semiology of communication and a semiology of signification. The first, historically developed on the basis of Saussure's proposal, only conceives as objects of an investigation on signs, those objects the

Luis Pazos

manifest purpose of which is to transmit messages through some channel. Instead, the semiologists of signification leave aside the importance of the transmission of information via messages, to investigate events which are in any case invested with meaning, even though their objective is not that of communicating, such as objects, images, rituals, etc.

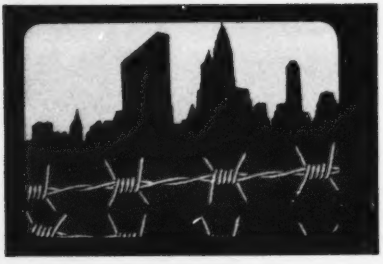
In video we find, on one hand, a specific communicational structure: en emitter, a receiver, a channel, a message, a code; in this sense, video enters the field of specifically communicational episodes. But, on the other hand, the transmitted events, the messages carried by that structure, are fundamentally ambiguous: the syntagmatic structure of numerous video works does not allow an easy and immediate decoding, but rather a cryptoanalysis, as happens with the events and objects whose initial objective has not been communication.

The artist reports, on various opportunities, on this process. It is common to hear that the creator is not interested in the reception of his work, that he is not concerned with whether he is understood correctly or not, and that, in the ultimate instance, he is searching for forms of expression and not communicational contacts. In a word, that he attempts to put together significant objects, rather than messages carrying information.

If we turn to natural tongues, we will observe that in them, the communicational and significant qualities are joined, as happens with numerous semiotic systems. Nevertheless, as it constitutes a synthesis of image and sound, video is a paradigmatic example: through it, art signifies. A traditional sculpture or painting is charged with meaning. Can it be inferred from this that it communicates with us? Surely not. But the case of video is special: here we meet with objects, conjunctions of unforeseen events, scenes filled with meaning or else open to all meanings.

When a semiotic structure is open to all meanings, the result may apparently be non sensical. The real figures of "accumulation" sometines manage to constitute cryptograms for those who do not know this or that creator's code. In the — frequent — case of an artist who plays with the technical possibilities of his electronic equipment, the multiplicity of resulting effects and nuances fuses with the iconic objects presented on the screen, adding to the total an ambiguity which is common to the accumulation of effects, and which is added to that which is already naturally contained in every image.

Luis Pazos

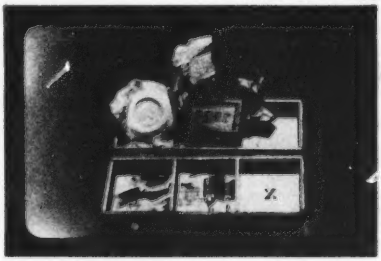


In this way, we can distinguish operatorially between two large areas of video-art: the communicational and the significative. To the former would belong those works whose privileged function is the transmission of one or several messages, on the basis of the structure which the medium normally manages: the testimonial, documentary, political video work, etc. To the significative would belong those works of "formalist" video-art where the technical processing is privileged, where the esthetic development of the presented images acquires importance, be it on their own or in conjunction with the sound. Naturally, the communicational and the significative are not mutually exclusive: the same work may contain both criteria.

Latin America video

This simultaneousness of the communicational and the significative is perceived in the works of Latin American video-art, for the reasons which we shall non detail.
In each cultural context, as the general conditions of creativity vary — the repertory of technical means, the conception of the operator-artist, the reception of the works, etc. — the forms of expression are perceivably altered. And even when the technical means are analogous, the works would be modified in their style if we alter any of the other factors.
This certainty allows us to draw a first distinction referred to the alterations derived from a diferent availability of scientific and technical developments, a subject which is related to a study of the importation and exportation of technology in the different countries, that is to say that it is closely connected with political economy. Indeed, in the nations whose level of development and importation of technology is lower, as happens in Latin America, the available means force a processing the characteristics of which can be summarized in the following manner:
a) Video tends to be of a documentary nature.
b) Its rhetoric is less complex and remains aloof from what se have called "formalist" videotapes.
c) New stylistic maneuvers appear, which do not derive so much from the play with electronic equipment as from a greater activity in the field of personal ingenuity.
d) The works remain "thematically" linked to their specific conditions of generation.
With regard to point a) it is important to point out that, lacking highly developed equipment, and certain possibilities of "playing" with the images being excluded,

Alfredo Portillos



Latin American artists tend towards a treatment having a more testimonial character, proposing as referent the objective conditions of their environment and using video as a register of external determinations. In this sense, the work carried out in Latin America inverts the sign imposed on video-art by the technologically more developed countries, which is oriented towards a thematization of the technical conditions rather than the socio-contextual ones.

But it would be erroneous to assume that the technological limitation is the only factor which conduces to this videographic tendency. As important as the former are the elements derived from the regional set of problems which exist in each area of creativity. There are, in consequence, two complementary forces which lead Latin American video to assume its predominantly documentary and testimonial character: those which have to do with techonology and those which are linked to the weight of social and cultural conditions.

From a rhetorical perspective, the fact that this type of video stays away from the "formalist" current does not imply that its stylistic processing is simpler. One must not confuse complexity of technical resources with complexity of rhetorical processing: Latin American video works are rhetorically complex even though their technical production conditions are not. There exists the belief that the reference to "reality" is a simple and easily accessible mechanism. On the contrary, from a rhetorical point of view, that reference demands an exercise of creativity and, for the video consumer, a special learning process. Thus, the artists who base their production on references to the reality which surrounds them are faced with an arduous task of truly "producing" that reality.

Among the most important mechanisms of that production are to be found those of verosimilitude, insofar as the operator intends to be believed by his recipients and to influence their representations of the world.

Maybe a good example of this activity of creation of a video-art which is related to external reality is constituted by the group of works produced by the Argentine artists who make up the CAYC Group.

Alfredo Portillos

Víctor Grippo, thematizing the potato in his tapes, alludes to two fundamental aspects: the Latin American origin of the tuber and the analogy between the potato and consciousness, which expresses an exaltation of Latin

American consciousness, of the existence of high vital values in the region where the potato originated.

Clorindo Testa refers to the architectonical and ecological problems of urban centres in precipitous development and to pollution in big cities, through playing-card castles which represent fragility in the face of the perils which stalk man.

Luis Fernando Benedit presents animal and artificial society labyrinths, which imply a contesting attitude because of the irony of the comparison between behaviour regulated by obstacles for the obtention of a reward — food — and the mechanical actions of large human societies, tending towards the achievement of objectives which do not differ substantially from those which motivate the conduct of the animals in the labyrinths.

Jacques Bedel deploys his imagery in video works which represent the transformation of remains of landscapes or human constructions, and their inclusion in the cultural context. His "Architectural Remains" are constructions which, captured by the camera, represent the different landscapes of Argentina's territory.

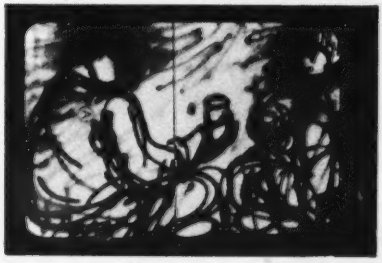
Vicente Marotta, in his work "More and Better Food for the World", toys with bags of wheat with the inscription "Produce of Argentina", images which are complemented with an exhibition of sausages. The proposal alludes unequivocally to the problem of hunger and malnutrition and the need to consume protein.

Alfredo Portillos presents simulacra of mythico-religious rituals of northern Argentina (Jujuy), in an artistic exaltation of regional customs linked with magic and popular beliefs.

Leopoldo Maler, in his allegorical version of "The Last Supper", offers an eminently localistic thematization: the set of 35 plastic lambs circling around while hanging from a chain over the table, evokes the traditional barbecue of the River Plate area.

We can, therefore, speak of Latin American video as an art of "fracture", which does not abide by the established codes but permanently lays bare the processes of artistic creation.

Clorindo Testa



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